DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 796 IR 058 052

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TITLE	The Digital Society's Challenge to the Library for the Blind.
PUB DATE	2000-08-00
NOTE	7p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference: Conference Proceedings (66th, Jerusalem, Israel, August 13-18, 2000); see IR 057 981.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla66/papers/048-158e.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Blindness; Foreign Countries; *Information Technology; Library Personnel; *Library Role; *Library Services; National Libraries; Organizational Change; *Special Libraries; Staff Development; *User Needs (Information); Users (Information)
IDENTIFIERS	Denmark; Technological Change

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses new strategies and potential roles for libraries for the blind, based on the author's experiences at the Danish National Library for the Blind (DBB). The first section is an introduction that provides background on DBB. The second section considers characteristics of the information community. The third section describes the following tasks of the library for the blind in the digital reality: (1) information equality between handicapped and non-handicapped; (2) the roles of lobbyist, inspirer, and watchdog; (3) direct contact between information vendors and the visually impaired; and (4) standards and universal design. The fourth section addresses competency development for library staff, including a competency development program at DBB that consists of modules that deal with communication skills, the technological shift from analog to digital production, personal competencies, and strengthening of management. The fifth section covers reorganization at DBB. The sixth section lists objectives for improved results at DBB. (MES)

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IFLA 2000 JERUSALEM Conference Proceedings

66th IFLA Council and General Conference

Jerusalem, Israel, 13-18 August

ED 450 796

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Code Number: 048-158-E
Division Number: III
Professional Group: Libraries for the Blind
Joint Meeting with: Public Libraries
Meeting Number: 158
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

The digital society's challenge to the library for the blind.

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Abstract

The information technology community poses challenges to libraries for the blind all over the world. Technology is on our side. As a result of technological advances it is now feasible to establish true equality between visually impaired and sighted people. To benefit from the brand new possibilites the libraries for the blind have to go through a range of changes and development processes. This paper comments on new strategies and potential roles for the libraries for the blind.

Paper

Introduction

During the past two years The Danish National Library for the Blind, DBB, has dedicated a lot of effort to formulating a new strategy for the institution's work. This new strategy stemmed from an analysis of DBB's own needs, the requirements of DBB's users, and last but not least the possibilities and barriers in DBB's surroundings.

Simultaneously with defining the new strategy, DBB has initiated an all-encompassing process of change that is intended to enable the organisation to optimise its performance; to function in a modern manner and to progress at all levels.

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Unlike most other libraries for the blind across the world, DBB is a national and publicly financed library. This means that DBB can base its activities on a stable and known economy, knowing that the Danish State supports the organisation. Several aspects make the function of DBB manageable. These aspects include the nationwide status of the library, the country's infrastructure and size - geographically as well as demographically. When compared to libraries for the blind in other countries, DBB has quite comfortable working conditions. Considering our unique basis for business at DBB, colleagues from other countries may find it difficult to directly emulate our situation and the way we work. On the other hand, it is my hope through this paper to be able to inspire you and give you food for thought for further discussions on the challenges posed by the information technology community to libraries for blind and visually impaired all over the world.

Characteristics of the information community

So what exactly is the community we come into contact with? the digital? the electronic the information technology world? Perhaps the most important in this context is a community where the flow of information is incomprehensibly expansive and is still growing exponentially.

It is a society in which the overview of and the access to information has a defining influence on the individual citizens possibilities. A society in which the individuals capacity to comprehend and process the content of the information has much significance.

It is also a society in which the development of information carrying media occurs at an outrageous pace; a society in which the choice of media forms is vast. Through the use of interactive media, the user chooses and rejects information at his or her whim. Through multi-activities the user's senses are stimulated or bombarded by a plethora of impressions. That and an abundance of other new technological refinements have become everyday phenomena in the lives of many people.

Many old borders have been superseded both virtually and literally. The global village was an expression much talked about in Denmark just a few years ago.

This phrase bears witness to the simultaneous existence of globalisation and localisation. The concept of the global village also illustrates the inherent need for seeking roots, for feeling safe, for social companionship and togetherness; traits that would be accorded a premium position for many when defining a balanced life.

In the current discussion globalisation is of special interest because globalisation also deals with the plethora of information inundating us - often electronically; crossing all borders via the Internet and satellites.

The task of the library for the blind in the digital reality

1. Information equality between handicapped and non-handicapped

   When defining major features of the digital community, we can also identify the role of the library for the blind. The fundamental goal of the library for the blind is not much different today than in former times - but then again quite different. The digital technology brings a whole new set of

possibilities and therewith greater expectations of the results Technology is on our side. As a result of many advances in technology; digitalised texts, internet connections, PC's hooked up to a network, cheap scanners, dedicated screen readers, synthesized speech and braille; for the first time in the history of mankind it is now feasible for us to establish true equality between visually handicapped and sighted people. It is this groundbreaking vision that changes the world, and must be ultimate basis for our future aspirations.

2. Lobbyist, inspirer and watchdog

So far the libraries for the blind have primarily been an information source for the visually impaired. The libraries for the blind have carried out the production of audio books and braille publications, a production which has been enhanced during the past couple of years with the introduction of electronic texts.

Even though the libraries for the blind have thus accomplished a major task, it has never been possible to acquire sufficient finances to support the production of audio and braille publication on a scale that would equal the amount of publications in society at large. On the contrary, despite acceptable allocations of funds for a small language area as Denmark, it has not been possible to produce audio publications of more than about 5% of the market's books, and only between 1 - 2% in braille of the total number of books published. Even though a far larger number of books is published in the l major languages in the form of audio and braille, it is still not possible for these countries to even come close to emulating the amount of publications on the market.

The libraries for the blind continue to have a future as publishers and producers of alternative formats. However, in-house production alone is far from sufficient. The technologies carry the promise of a new potential.

Only by encouraging other information providers to think about multiple forms of accessibility will it be possible for the libraries for the blind to increase the amount of useable information sources on a much larger scale than possible with only in-house production.
Hence, a major crusade for the libraries for the blind would be to motivate information providers to take responsibility for enhancing accessibility.

Therefore the libraries for the blind should take upon themselves the role of inspirer, lobbyist and watchdog. In Denmark we assume that role primarily towards other public libraries but also towards commercial information vendors, who develop and sell library systems.

3. Information directly at the source

The libraries for the blind can take part in creating a direct contact between information vendors and the visually impaired by means of lobbying and the increasing knowledge of the problems of access by visually impaired readers. Together with other groups, DBB strives to encourage commercial information vendors to take handicap accessibility into consideration when planning their electronic products or services.
Alas, the desire to make profits far outstrips consideration that should be paid to access for all.

The solution is information, information and yet again information. Those

not normally involved with producing publications for the visually impaired often consider the demand for accessibility as a cumbersome and costly affair. We cannot accomplish this mission on our own; but we can contribute by participating in concrete co-operative projects with commercial information vendors. And by doing so, show that handicap accessibility is a stumbling block in the path of functionality neither does it offend the aesthetic value so much coveted by the sighted.

4. Standards and universal design

   A prerequisite for our crusade of keeping abreast of developments in society is that we base our solutions on common, well-known standards in combination with standard and mainstream products. Hence DBB firmly supports the Daisy consortium's concern for standards. This applies to the standard for the digital audio book and for the e-book, moreover for the lobbying for achieving accessibility standards in web-designs.

   The same applies to playback devices. DBB strives, as far as possible, to rely on products that currently exist on the market. To what extent that will be possible is a question we hope to find the answer to within the next couple of years.

Competency development

All the things I have so far mentioned show that there are many tasks that need to be handled by the libraries for the blind. What is more, if the visually impaired are to reach the same level of communication as other members of society, it is of paramount importance that these goals be achieved in the foreseeable future. That alone constitutes a big challenge - at least for DBB.

At DBB we have enjoyed a very traditional and steady existence, where changes and developments happened upon us in a calm and controlled manner. But times have changed. The organisation's 100 employees have been there for many years. When they started their carriers at DBB, demands were simpler and fewer.

If we continue in the same tempo, our users will lag far behind in the general development of society. Therefore, we give high priority to encouraging the ability and desire for change. It is not an easy process, but small successes foster hope in the organisation and convince the individual participant that he/she has a place and a role to play in creating the ongoing success of DBB.

The tasks are more complex than ever before. Highly advanced knowledge and development takes the place of, or supplements the old production model. In step with the development of society in general and the users own development in particular, more demands are placed on the communicating of materials and information. This means, at DBB, that the communications unit acquire whole new assignments, e.g. to act as co-navigators for the users on the Internet.

The situation requires completely different forms of work and co-operation than we have known and used so far. Therefore we see the need for the continued development of qualifications on a professional as well as on a personal level.

The growing need for knowledge intensive competencies is not only a prerequisite for the libraries for the blind. It is a condition that influences many societies and institutions in general. Hence we are open to inspiration from other parts of the society in helping us proceed with the development processes we have initiated. At DBB we have developed a competency development

programme "unchain your values" which we will go ahead with over the next couple of years provided that we obtain the finances we need. The process consists of four modules that deal with the following aspects:

- Development of communication skills
- Technological shift from analogue to digital production
- Strengthening the personal competencies that make it possible to work in a flat structure organisation that empowers the individual as much as possible.
- Strengthening of management.

Reorganising the DBB

As part of the process of change initiated at DBB, we have redesigned our organisation. The changes were brought about in order to support the general objectives of DBB. In practice this has meant that 8 departments have been merged into four areas. For instance the sound and brail production departments have been merged into one production unit. We strive to align as many work processes as possible from the two productions in order to free resources that can be channelled to increased development and larger production.
Another focus for DBB is to break out of the isolation that has influenced the organisation's relations with the outside world. DBB has had its determining focus on the world of the blind, nationally and internationally. Thereby knowledge of and cooperation with other parts of the Danish society have been rather limited. Today we are establishing networks. As many as possible. Horizontally as well as vertically?. Nationally as well as internationally.

We try to establish co-operation with target groups, as well as research libraries, with a view to teaching them about accessibility and in order for us to learn from their situations. This will make it possible for us to support and inspire them with our unique profile and goal.

Better results

So what is it all worth? Apart from the visionary considerations of complete technological equality, we, at DBB, have committed ourselves during the next four years to improving our results as follows:

- All new audio production must be digital
- 20 % increase in audio production
- 40% more copies of publications.
- Converting 32.000 master tapes from analogue to digital
- Experiments with speech synthesizers
- Achieving accessibility of two new products in cooperation with commercial information vendors
- Special emphasis on:
  - Braille users
  - Business and PC users
  - Persons who have become deaf and blind
  - Children
  - Refugees and immigrants
- New interactive library system
- Advisory centres for the public and research libraries regarding accessibility issues
- New salary structures
- PC workstations for all employees

Conclusion

In this day and age, there are many interesting challenges in working with the library for the blind.
The opportunities present large demands on management as well as staff. We clearly need the ability and will to change at all levels of our organisations. We need access to new knowledge, to integrate and profit from new learning. We need to act fast or we will lose the chance of seizing the right psychological moment. Perhaps the most difficult demand is that of the speed at which an organisation should function. Alas, there is no other way.
The time is at hand to transform strategies and implement new tasks while we are still able to influence the situation.

Some management specialists speak of rediscovering an organisation's values in a new context and marketing this revived set of values. At DBB, we follow that line, and are able to get across our ideas, advice and messages to the world that surrounds us. In this way we can get our message across to the rest of the world.

Latest Revision: *May 12, 2000*

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